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ABSTRACT

Revolving around the theme of questioning in the classroom, the three articles in this newsletter are based on talks and workshop material drawn from the 1986 Summer Institute of the College Board's Educational EQuality Project. In the first article, "The Art of Questioning," Dennie Palmer Wolf points out that although most teachers feel questioning is a very important part of their teaching, they rarely can explain how they question, and that research has shown that many teachers use questions ineffectively. The article provides a taxonomy of question types, including inference, interpretation, and transfer questions as well as questions about hypotheses; gives examples from real classroom dialogues, and proposes hypotheses for why so few questions are actually asked in the classroom. The second article, "When Students Ask Questions," by Jane Schaffer, describes personal experiences that show the importance of questioning in the classroom, especially the need for both students and teachers to ask questions and for teachers to ask "lively" questions. The third article, "A Reporter's Questions," by Edna Buchanan, stresses the destructive as well as constructive powers of a reporter's questions through personal anecdotes about courtroom and interview questioning. (SKC)

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Academic Connections™

Winter 1987

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The Art of Questioning

Dennis Palmer Wolf

[This article was originally a talk delivered at the Summer Institute of the College Board's Educational EQuality Project, held in Santa Cruz, California, July 9-13, 1986. At the institute more than one hundred high school and college teachers convened to consider how concerns raised by the education reform movement can be translated into improvements in everyday teaching practice. One topic given particularly close attention was that of questioning in the classroom. Dennie Wolf's remarks provided the keynote for these deliberations, and the version of her talk presented here has been expanded slightly to take into account questions raised by institute participants.

The observations that appear in the article come from classrooms Wolf visited while working as a consultant to the College Board's Office of Academic Affairs and as a member of a research project on assessment in the arts currently funded by the Rockefeller Foundation. She especially thanks teachers in Boston, Cambridge, Los Angeles, Pittsburgh, and St. Paul for their generous cooperation. Wolf works with Project Zero, Harvard University Graduate School of Education.]

Ask a teacher how he or she teaches and, chances are, the answer is, "By asking questions." However, if you go on and ask just how he or she uses questions or what sets apart keen, invigorating questioning from perfunctory versions, that same teacher might have a hard time replying. In itself this is no condemnation — there are many occasions when we do magnificently without explicit knowledge: Few of us can explain transformational grammar, but we can form questions, all the same. A major league pitcher is sure of dozens of algorithms for trajectory, though his theory is as much in his elbow as on the tip of his tongue.

Still, a growing body of observation and research suggests that teachers' uncertainty about how they question cannot, or should not, be explained simply as a lack of explicit knowledge. Consider several observations that have emerged from recent educational research:

- There are many classrooms in which teachers rarely pose questions above the "read-it-and-repeat-it" level. Questions that demand inferential reasoning, much less hypothesis-formation or the creative transfer of information to new situations, simply do not occur with any frequency (Gall 1970; Mills, Rice, Berliner, and Rousseau 1980).
- The questions and answers that do occur often take place in a bland, if not boring or bleak, intellectual landscape, where student answers meet only with responses from teachers at the "uh-huh" level. Even more sobering is the observation that teachers' questions often go nowhere. They may request the definition of a sonnet, the date of Shakespeare's birth, the meaning of the word "varlet" — but, once the reply is given, that is the end of the sequence. Extended stretches of questioning in which the information builds from facts toward insight or complex ideas rarely take place (Goodlad 1984, Sadker and Sadker 1985).
- Classroom questions are often disingenuous. Some are rhetorical: "Are we ready to begin now?" Others are mere information checks — a teacher knows the answer and wants to know if students do, too. Missing from many classrooms are what might be considered true questions, either requests for new information that belongs uniquely to the person being questioned or initiations of mutual inquiry (Bly 1986, Cook-Gumperz 1982).
- The very way in which teachers ask questions can undermine, rather than build, a shared spirit of investigation. First, teachers tend to monopolize the right to question — rarely do more than procedural questions come from students (Campbell 1986). Second, the question-driven exchanges that occur in classrooms almost uniformly take place between teachers and students, hardly ever shifting so that questions flow *between* students. Moreover, classroom questioning can be exclusive. It can easily become the private preserve of a few — the bright, the male, the English-speaking (Erickson 1975, Erickson and Schultz 1981, Hall and Sandler 1982).
- Questions can embarrass, rather than inquire. They can leave a student feeling exposed and stupid, more willing to skip class than to be humiliated again (Bly 1986).

While this account of classroom questioning is grim, it is

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also partial. In writing *Academic Preparation in the Arts* (College Board 1985) and working on a study of assessment in the arts funded by the Rockefeller Foundation, I have spent a number of hours in the back of classrooms. From there I have seen skilled teachers raise questions that ignited discussion, offer a question that promised to simmer over several days, or pursue a line of questioning that led to understanding. Those teachers suggest a counter-portrait of classroom questioning, one that contains detailed clues about how the language of classroom dialogue can be used to establish and sustain not just a momentary discussion but a lasting climate of inquiry. My examples happen to come from arts and humanities classrooms, but I can think of no reason why they should not apply in other subject areas as well — granting, of course, that transferring them may reveal interesting differences among subject areas.

However, before turning to these classroom observations, I want to suggest that the issue of what questions are asked and how they are posed is, or ought to be, part of a much larger inquiry. Currently, there is a deep concern about how — or even if — we teach students to think. There is startling evidence that many high school students cannot draw inferences from texts, distinguish the relevant information in mathematics problems, or provide and defend a thesis in an essay. We have apparently developed a system of education in which rote learning occurs early and inquiry late. We teach the skills of scribes and clerks, rather than authors and mathematicians (Reznick 1985, Wolf et al. in press). We have come to accept a view of education that sees the experience of schooling largely in terms of its power to produce employable, rather than intelligent, students and that suffers from basic confusion over the conflicts between pluralism and excellence (Lazerson 1986).

Embedded in this broad concern, however, there is — or ought to be — a second critique — one that points out that the situation of disadvantaged, minority, female, and handicapped students is still more dire (National Coalition of Advocates for Students 1985). For many of them, skills such as analysis, hypothesis testing, discussion, and essay writing may not just be taught late and meagerly — they may

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Dennie Wolf, a keynote speaker at the institute, opened the discussion of questioning in the classroom.

be virtually unavailable. Hence, when we examine skilled questioning (or instruction of any kind), it is essential to learn from those teachers who understand how to engage a wide community of learners. As one college teacher put it, "It's not hard to teach philosophy to students who learned the rules of argument and evidence at the dinner table. That's a matter of dotting the i's and crossing the t's. The real issue is whether I can teach students who don't come already knowing."

Independent of whom they teach, skilled teachers question in distinctive ways: they raise a *range* of questions, they sustain and build *arcs of questions*, their inquiries are *authentic*, they inquire with a sense of *respect and decency*.

A Range of Questions

Thirty years ago, Benjamin Bloom (1956) suggested that the same information can be handled in more and less demanding ways — students can be asked to recall facts, to analyze those facts, to synthesize or discover new information based on the facts, or to evaluate knowledge. My own classroom observations suggest that there is an even greater range of challenging questions than Bloom's familiar taxonomy indicates:

Inference Questions. These questions ask students to go beyond the immediately available information (Bruner 1957). For example, a high school photography teacher held up a black-and-white portrait of a machinist taken by Paul Strand, and asked, "What do you know by looking at this photograph?" Through careful questioning and discussion his students realized that the image contained hints that implied a whole network of information: clues to content (where and when the photograph was taken), technique (where the photographer stood, where the light sources were located), and meaning or attitude (what Strand felt about industry and workers). To push beyond the factual in this way is to ask students to find clues, examine them, and discuss what inferences are justified.

Interpretation Questions. If inference questions demand that students fill in missing information, then interpretive questions propose that they understand the consequences of information or ideas. One day when her English class was struggling to make sense of Frost's poem, "The Silken Tent," a teacher asked, "Imagine if Frost compared the woman to an ordinary canvas tent instead of a silk one — what would change?" Faced with the stolid image of a stiff canvas tent, students suddenly realized the fabric of connotations set in motion by the idea of silk — its sibilant, rustling sounds; its associations with elegance, wealth, and femininity; its fluid motions. In a similar spirit, during a life-drawing class, a teacher showed his students a reproduction of Manet's "Olympia" and asked them, "How would the picture be different if the model weren't wearing that black tie around her neck?" A student laid her hand over the tie, studied the image and commented, "Without the ribbon she doesn't look so naked. She looks like a classical model. With the ribbon, she looks undressed, bolder."

Transfer Questions. If inference and interpretation questions ask a student to go deeper, transfer questions provoke a kind of breadth of thinking, asking students to take their knowledge to new places. For example, the final exam for a high school film course contained this question: "This semester we studied three directors: Fellini, Hitchcock, and Kurosawa. Imagine that you are a film critic and write a review of "Little Red Riding Hood" as directed by *one* of these individuals."

Questions about Hypotheses. Typically, questions about what can be predicted and tested are thought of as belonging to sciences and other "hard" pursuits. But, in fact, predictive thinking matters in all domains. When we read a novel, we gather evidence about the world of the story, the trustworthiness of the narrator, the style of the author, all of which we use to predict what we can expect in the next chapter. Far from letting their students simply soak in the content of dances, plays, or fiction, skilled teachers probe for predictions as a way of making students actively aware of their expectations. For instance, as a part of preparing "The Crucible," a drama teacher suggested the following.

Teacher: Find a scene where you have an exchange with a character in the play. Then find a place where you can open up the dialogue and insert three or four new turns — ones you make up. I want half a page at least.
Student 1: Yeah, but it's all done.
Student 2: How can we know, anyway?
Teacher: You have all the evidence you need in the scene. What are you going to build on?
Student 1: It would have to be about the same thing.
Teacher: Mmmm mmm.
Student 2: They'd have to talk the same way they've been talking. I mean with the same kind of emotion. Also right for that character — just what they know.
Teacher: Okay, you're on.

Reflective Questions. When teachers ask reflective questions, they are insisting that students ask themselves: "How do I know I know?"; "What does this leave me not knowing?"; "What things do I assume rather than examine?" Such questions may leave a class silent, because they take mulling over. Nonetheless, they eventually lead to important talk about basic assumptions. Consider how, at the end of the year, students often read the chapters in their texts that discuss non-Western music, art, or drama. Consider, too, the power of the following question, which a music teacher asked his class on a May afternoon: "What would it mean if I called all the music we've listened to up until now, "non-Eastern music?" With that, he lifted the grain of a whole set of usual assumptions and asked that students consider what is implicit in terms such as "non-Western" or "primitive."

An Arc of Questions

But simply posing a variety of questions hardly creates a climate for inquiry. At least as important is the way in which teachers respond to the answers their questions provoke. Thus, recent research (Sadker and Sadker 1985) suggests that too often students' replies meet with little more than a passing "uh-huh." Such responses can stop inquiry dead in its tracks. In place of such dead-end situations, skilled teachers give an exchange of questions a life-course. Across a long arc of questions and answers, they pursue an investigation in which simple factual inquiries give way to increasingly interpretive questions until new insights emerge. For an observer, there is an impression of a kind of mutually constructed improvisation unfolding (Mehan 1978, 1979). In this improvisation, teachers keep questions alive through long stretches of time, coming back to them days, even weeks, after they have first been asked.

Take, for instance, this exchange, which occurred between a teacher and a student, as the student worked on an essay about the meaning of Dr. T.J. Eckleberg in Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*.

Session 1
Teacher: Who is Eckleberg?
Student: Not a real character. I mean, he's just a sign by the road.
Teacher: What's he doing in the story then?
Student: Well, Nick passes the sign when he drives to East and West Egg.
Teacher: When does he show up in the story — every time Nick goes driving that way?
(The student leafs through the book to pick out the instances.)
Teacher: So now what do you think?
Student: (looking over the list) The times he gets mentioned are when Nick's driving and thinking. Usually when something bad is about to happen or did just happen.

Session 2 (several days later)
Teacher: Why does Fitzgerald bother to mention the Eckleberg sign, when there are probably hundreds along the way?
Student: Maybe it's an odd sign. See, it's this giant pair of

glasses that are up there advertising an oculist, you know, an eye doctor.

Teacher: Why didn't Fitzgerald make Eckleberg a bumper sticker, instead of a billboard?

Student: 'Cause if he's a billboard he can look out.... He's like a god, up above everything.

Teacher: Why is he located out there between East and West Egg?

Student: Maybe 'cause it's like being stranded, like in heaven, away from things.

Teacher: Why do you think he's an oculist?

Students: (puzzled, slightly exasperated at being made to dig like this) Fitzgerald *said*... because he's an ad for an oculist. The guy who put him up there was an oculist.

Teacher: But it could have been a car dealer, too. Why those enormous yellow spectacles?

Student: Yeah....(pauses, thinking) Maybe that says something about the idea of watching and seeing.... It's not ordinary eyes, it's extraordinary eyes ... like the eyes of God, he takes it all in.

Teacher: Remember what you said about *when* he shows up?

Student: When there's evil — like judgment.

This arc of questioning allows information to accrue a kind of satisfying depth and complexity. Gradually, the student pieces together an idea of Eckleberg as a watching god — looking out, being raised above, apart, as if in heaven, seeing all. It is almost as if the questions posed form a kind of catwalk of realizable possibilities along which a student can move toward new insights (Luria 1976, Vygotsky 1978, Wertsch, 1978).

The Authenticity of Questions

Many of the questions that occur in classrooms aren't genuine. Some — such as, "Will you please put away your brushes and paints?" — are purely rhetorical. Others — in fact, the majority — are insincere in another way. They are not requests for information the speaker genuinely needs; rather, they are checks to see if a student has the information a teacher already knows (Cook-Gumperz 1982). These covert commands and information checks are not necessarily bad — unless, of course, they are the only questions students hear. In that case, students lose the opportunity to see their teachers engaged in serious inquiry, in which questions function as *bona fide* tools for thinking and understanding.

One important occasion on which students see teachers ask genuine questions is when a teacher tries seriously and persistently to get to the bottom of what a student is after but cannot express or attain. Here is a student trying to write about why *To Kill a Mockingbird* is a good title for Harper Lee's novel. He has opened with Atticus's quote about not killing mockingbirds but cannot figure out how to get from the quote to the introductory paragraph of the essay.

Teacher: You have a quote and then you need to get into the part about what happens in the book, right?

Student: Yes (annoyed; he can smell that rewriting is coming).

Teacher: I think you need a transition between the two.

Student: I know, but I don't want to sound stupid by telling them (very slow and pedantic): This-is-my-bridge-between-these-two-thoughts.

Teacher: Is it the idea that you don't like or that it sounds so obvious?

Student: It sounds so dumb....I don't want to be someone in the story.

Teacher: (not sure what he means yet) Let's think about a comfortable way for you to make the connection. What about if you have something like, "In the book, *To Kill a Mockingbird*, the central character, Atticus, says...." Then you will have started in your voice, and when you go back to explaining the quote, it won't be barging in?

Student: *I* can't be *in* the story.

Teacher: How's that you being *in* the story?

Student: It's me explaining something.

Teacher: But an essay is a place where you *do* explain.

Student: I just want to go on with what happens in the story. They'll understand the connection.

Teacher: Okay, how about saying something like, "In *To Kill a Mockingbird* two characters, Tom and Boo, are like the mockingbirds Atticus describes"?

Student: Okay, let me see what I can do. (He goes back to his desk and writes his own version of this transition.)

At the outset, the teacher is not sure what it means "to be in the story" or why that should be so troubling. But sticking with her instinct that it is troubling, she tries — through asking genuine questions — to pin down what is bothersome. Together she and the student struggle to explain what each values or wants for the opening of an essay. At one level their communication is not smooth or particularly effective, but at another the student hears his teacher asking questions to carve out mutual understanding.

One-on-one exchanges are not the only occasions on which genuine questions arise. For instance, in arts classes — as well as in history and science classes — there are often chances to study the way a particular experience is interpreted by different individuals: a trip to see a surrealistic interpretation of Hamlet or a breakneck performance of a Brahms symphony. Alternatively, teachers have the option of showing students that deep into adulthood people run into serious questions that may consume or puzzle them, or may give them deep pleasure to solve, or both. A particular dance teacher comes to mind. In talking about her teaching she says: "My students know I choreograph and perform outside of class. Every so often I run up against a problem in my own work — the dance and the music start to rub each other the wrong way, a dancer has qualities that begin to transform the part, or I feel the dance grinding and creaking in the same old ways. So I show it to them. I say to them, "This is going wrong. Watch it and tell me what you think."

Decent Questions

The way in which teachers question provides a kind of barometer for the social values of classrooms — particularly

High school and college teachers attending the EQ Summer Institute discussed how concerns raised by the education reform movement can be translated into improved teaching practice in day-to-day school classes.

questions of who can learn and who can teach. For instance, the way in which teachers question reveals whether they suspect learning flows only from a teacher or whether it can come from other students. In the following example (also found in *Academic Preparation in the Arts*) a teacher encourages *students* to exchange ideas about two shirts: one a polyester shirt printed with a sharp, yellow-and-black checkerboard pattern, the other an Apache overshirt of painted buckskin:

Ms. V (the teacher): By looking *just at the shirts*, what can you tell me about these cultures?

(Several students make contributions.)

Peter: The buckskin shirt was made in a culture that loves nature, and the polyester shirt was made in a culture that doesn't care about nature.

Ms. V: That's a big statement. What do you *see* in the shirt that lets you say that?

Peter: The polyester shirt hasn't got anything natural in it. The buckskin shirt is all natural: skin, hand-painted, looks to me like vegetable dyes.

Nava: Yes, but you could have a culture that loved nature but used plastics and chemicals to express it.

Peter: No, that's not what I mean.

Ms. V: Look again at the shirts. What else do you see that's evidence for your idea?

Nava: The images on the shirts. The modern one has got just black and yellow squares, nothing like plants or water. But the buckskin shirt has all those lines of raindrops and stars.

(She points to strips of painted and drop-like shapes in the border.)

Peter: But maybe those are just decorations. How do we know that those are raindrops? Maybe they are just patterns like the checkerboard in the other shirt.

Through their questions teachers have the power to offer opportunities for dialogue to particular groups of students or to withhold opportunities from them. Along these lines, in a 1982 study, Hall and Sandler found that, when compared to their female peers, young males are much more likely to ask questions and to have them answered in a serious way. Minority students' participation in classroom discussion is similarly endangered. We know that sometimes there are culturally organized differences between classroom and home regarding the appropriateness of asking questions, the rules about who can be questioned, or what forms inquiries should take (Boggs 1972, Heath 1983). Yet, when minority students fail to join in classroom inquiry, teachers may interpret their hesitation, not as uncertainty about the rules of communication, but as lack of ability, and may cease to consider them valuable, contributing members of a class (Bremme and Erickson 1977, Erickson 1975, Erickson and Schultz 1981.)

Clearly, teachers can use questions to embarrass or to empower. For instance, questions can be designed to smoke out guilty parties — students who didn't do their homework, who fail to answer quickly enough, or who can't think on their feet. But it is equally possible to use questions to promote students' sense of themselves as knowledgeable and skilled. Thus, even though the student in the following example does not yet know what she thinks, her teacher takes her search quite seriously. In back of his questions is the assumption that the student can come to know.

(In a print-making class, a teacher leans over a large linoleum print with a student.)

Teacher: What's bothering you about it?

Student: I liked the idea, but I don't like the print.

Teacher: Let's track down where you lost it. Get out your portfolio.

(At this juncture they pull out the student's portfolio and turn to the sheaves of sketches and trial runs of the print.)

Teacher: Okay, page through these until you come to the one where things go wrong for the first time.

(The student studies the portfolio, finding the moment when the original incised-line print is cut away drastically, leaving only the outlines of the face.)

Student: That's where I don't like it.

Teacher: Have a careful look and tell me what exactly changed.

Student: I can't tell.

Teacher: Okay, talk out loud about each part of it, the hair, the sun, the neck — why are they there, what's in them, what do you want them to do?

Had there been a videotape of this exchange, it would have revealed still another level at which questions embarrass or empower: nonverbal *performance*. The teacher looks at the student when he poses questions; he studies the prints when she does; he respects, rather than cuts off, the student, even when she gropes for an answer; he waits for her to formulate a reply. Studies of just these kinds of subtle phenomena — such as, how long a teacher waits for a reply — indicate that small changes, even in the nonverbal integrity of questioning, can have measurable effects on the quality of classroom inquiry (Tobin 1986).

Then Why So Few Questions?

Teachers know questions to be one of their most familiar — maybe even one of their most powerful — tools. But if observations are accurate, much of classroom inquiry is low-level, short, even exclusive or harsh. Moreover, these qualities turn out to be remarkably resistant to change. Thus, an early study of questioning done in 1912 (Stevens 1912) found that two-thirds of classroom questions required nothing more than direct recitation of textbook information. Now, more than 70 years after the original study, research suggests that 60 percent of the questions students hear require factual answers, 20 percent concern procedures, and only 20 percent require inference, transfer, or reflection (Gall 1970).

Why is this the case? Here, ironically, where the vital issue of what fuels or explains these persistent patterns of questioning emerges, there is little or no research. But each time that I have talked with teachers about questioning, they have had explanations. While teachers freely admit they have colleagues who are simply not interested in the work of questioning, they also point out that there are hurdles even for the committed. Here, in their own words, are some things they have pointed out to me.

- It takes skill and practice to build a climate of inquiry, and there are few forums in which teachers can be helped in — or rewarded for — this endeavor.

  "There are 34 students in the room. Some have read the story, others haven't; some understand, others are lost. It takes skill — lots of skill — to put together a discussion for those 34 people. Frankly, it is often easier for me to take charge."

- It is a formidable challenge to establish and maintain a climate of inquiry with students of widely varying backgrounds and skills.

  "Questions work fine when you have students who have a set of prior skills — I mean, who know about listening to what someone else says, who can follow up with a question of their own, who are used to digging for information. But what do you do when you don't find that? Do you stop to teach it? And how do you teach it, anyway?"

  "My classroom has everything in it: kids whose families have taught them the 'right' thing is to be quiet and respect the teacher, kids who argue for the sake of arguing, girls who take neatly indented notes and never say a word, boys who like hearing themselves talk. How do you make it work for all of them?"

- But even with such problems as class size and diversity, teachers rarely cite students as the major obstacle. Instead, they describe the culture of schools as one that dampens their *own* investment in inquiry.

  "Don't forget that teachers live day in and day out in a school culture. That culture teaches. In most places it teaches you to suspect that there is nothing to learn from students. It puts textbooks — not primary sources — in your hands. Textbooks make for the recitation of facts. It's a culture that puts coverage above all. You have to cover all of *Macbeth* in twelfth-grade English, never mind how your students read. You have to get through WWII. What textbooks start, tests often enforce. In that world, questions, especially big messy ones, are dangerous. You have to keep too many of them from happening."

So what do these interested teachers want? Concretely, they ask for time and opportunity to think about their classes as moments of joint inquiry — time to observe skilled colleagues in action, time to see themselves on videotape, time to think through not just lesson plans, but process plans: when to ask, who to ask, and above all, how to ask and respond (Kasulis 1986). Teachers want not just to hear about how "prejudicial teacher questioning patterns" are, they want time to grapple with equity and excellence issues head-on, at the level of values and ethics. And, most profoundly, skilled teachers want to be engaged in inquiry themselves. Teachers want to join with scholars to think about curriculum, as occurs in the Yale–New Haven Teachers Institute and in the university–school collaborations of the Los Angeles–based Humanitas Academy. They want to have their own skills probed and honed in the way that the Bay Area Writing Program and the Dialogue program in St. Paul do by offering them (not just their students) time to write. Simply put, many teachers want to learn about the skills demanded in questioning and other forms of inquiry — but they want to learn in ways that will sustain their own abilities to inquire and reflect about their own subjects of interest.

Why Question?

These examples suggest their own reasons for why we must bother about questions despite the obstacles. Let me further venture that there may be two additional outcomes of fine questioning that often escape the notice of traditional measures of classroom achievement.

First, there is a social outcome — students need the face-to-face skill of raising questions with other people: clarity about what they don't understand and want to know; the willingness to ask; the bravery to ask again. It is as central in chasing down the meaning of a dance, the lessons of the Korean war, or the uses and abuses of nuclear reactors. One could rephrase the Chinese proverb: Ask a man a question

and he inquires for a day; teach a man to question and he inquires for life.

And, second, there is a creative or inventive outcome. Being asked and learning to pose strong questions might offer students a deeply held, internal blueprint for inquiry — apart from the prods and supports of questions from *without*. That blueprint would have many of the qualities that teachers' best questions do: range, arc, authenticity. But if the sum is greater than the parts, there might be an additional quality — call it a capacity for question finding (Getzels and Csikszentmihalyi 1976). Question finding is the ability to go to a poem, a painting, a piece of music — or a document, a mathematical description, a science experiment — and locate a novel direction for investigation. This ability is difficult to teach directly, yet it may be one of the most important by-products of learning in an educational climate in which the questions asked are varied, worth pursuit, authentic, and humanely posed. Here Gertrude Stein comes to mind. As she lay ill, someone approached and asked, "What is the answer?" and she — so legend has it — had the energy to quip, "What is the question?"

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When Students Ask Questions

Jane Schaffer

[Jane Schaffer led a workshop session at the EQ Summer Institute that dealt with the importance of including students' questions as part of classroom inquiry. This interview explores the teaching experiences on which Schaffer based the workshop and also includes comment on why questioning emerges as an important topic in the recent College Board publication Academic Preparation in English: Teaching for Transition from High School to College.

Jane Schaffer is English Department Chair at Santana High School in California and is also a member of the College Board's English Advisory Committee. The interview was conducted by Marianne Finnegan, consultant to the Board's Office of Academic Affairs.]

Q. *Academic Preparation in English* calls for particular attention to how teachers ask questions in the classroom. The book suggests that skill in teaching must include the practice of what Dennie Wolf calls the "art of questioning." Do you agree?

A. Wholeheartedly. *Academic Preparation in English* is right to point out that questions — usually those of teachers or textbooks — shape and give direction to much of what happens in the classroom. Others, of course, make a similar point. I have just read a national education report that comments that "questioning is the teacher's most useful tool." But despite this obvious importance, teachers do not get much training in understanding what makes a good question or in how to use questions effectively in class discussion. At least I didn't, and I suspect this is true for most others as well. So I think we should begin to look closely at the experience we have had with questioning to see what it tells us.

Q. Can you suggest a place to begin?

A. I can tell you something about my personal classroom experience. Perhaps we can talk about reading and the study of literature to keep within some very general boundaries. Also, I'll be talking about my tenth- and eleventh-grade classes. Maybe what I say will suggest some questions that other teachers may want to ask about their own classroom situations.

Q. Fine. Where do you want to begin?

A. By mentioning the place I want to reach with my students. In thinking about teaching literature, I always try to keep in mind the learning outcomes that we hope our students achieve during the time we have with them. Here I think *Academic Preparation in English* identifies one outcome that deserves special emphasis: the importance of a student's ability to read critically by asking pertinent questions, by recognizing assumptions and implications, and by evaluating ideas. I give special attention here to "asking pertinent questions." Too often we ignore how essential question making is to critical thought.

Q. How do you approach this with your students?

A. May I first say something more about this learning outcome? *Academic Preparation in English* states very explicitly that teachers should seek to have students frame and ask their own questions about the literature that they read. Let me quote: "If students rely entirely on questions asked by teachers, they will remain dependent learners. The ultimate purpose of the teacher is to encourage students to become independent learners. Students become independent — and thus responsible — to the extent that they formulate significant questions for which they desire to have answers." I might say this a little differently, but the aim is exactly the same as the one I have for my own students.

Q. And how do you put this aim into practice?

A. By trying to remember from the outset that questions should emerge as part of a student's reading and not just appear, or be imposed, as a kind of final thing that happens — in the way, for instance, that publishers tag on questions at the close of readings in anthologies or chapters in textbooks.

Q. Or that teachers place on final examinations?

A. Well, yes. Summary questions have a place, of course; but they frequently make for passive reading. If students expect that questions *only* come afterwards and from some source other than themselves, they are going to wait — usually not too eagerly — for them to show up. My students usually groan when I assign them questions from the textbook. This is not because of the work involved. It's because the questions are — as students will tell you — so very predictable and so lacking in interest.

Jane Schaffer, chair of a high school English department, led an institute session on the importance of including students' questions in classroom discussions.

Q. Are these questions really so inadequate?

A. Many of them are. Often the questions ask for little more than factual recall. Students can see that they are extended fill-in-the-blank questions, not very different actually from those in the workbook drills they were required to do over and over again beginning in elementary school. A question on Orwell's *1984*, for instance, might ask, "Who was Big Brother?" Well, students are programmed to "look up" the answer. They will begin, "Big Brother is the symbol of the Party" and go on — usually not very long — in that vein. Their answers aren't incorrect, and the question does take them back into the story. Unfortunately, it does this in such a way that they merely parrot some version of what they find there. It doesn't provoke any genuine thought on their part — which is what Orwell hoped to do, of course. I often get answers to these questions that are accurate in a literal sense but seldom any that are enlivened by the student's own thought about the book.

... We shouldn't make the problem appear so large that individual teachers think they can't do anything about it.

Q. Isn't the problem with these questions, then, related to the whole culture of schooling in this country? What you say suggests that students begin very early to develop certain fixed ideas about what is expected of them when a teacher asks a question.

A. This is probably true, but we shouldn't make the problem appear so large that individual teachers think they can't do anything about it. I have observed teachers who have done a great deal to better the situation. Oddly enough, though, our very best intentions sometimes get in our way. Mine did, anyway. For a long time, I worked very hard to make sure that questions I asked during class discussion and on exams were better, more thought-provoking, than those provided in the textbooks. Well, they *were* better and so were the results. But something still wasn't right. The predictable pattern remained. Most students were still passive, waiting to hear what the questions were going to be and then sort of groping for the answer they were sure was firmly planted in my mind. It was as if they thought nothing at all about the story until they heard my questions, and, also — hey, *I* was having all the fun! There I was up in front tap-dancing away, feeling the exhilaration of how keen my questions were — and not noticing that this was taking opportunity away from my students.

Q. What do you mean?

A. I mean partly that my own reading was sharpened because I was thinking about questions to ask as I went along, and also partly that asking these questions showed what *I* could do. So why shouldn't it be the same for my students? What if I asked them to think about questions that needed or wanted answering as they read? Isn't there a Chinese proverb that says, "What we do, we learn"? Well, my students needed to be doing. With things as they were, I was the active reader — or performer — and they the passive audience. To achieve a better balance, I thought, they should be a little more in my place and I a little more in theirs.

Q. How did you change your teaching practice to bring this about?

A. It would have done little good to say to the students that we will begin to base class discussion more on your questions and less on mine, though this was exactly my aim. I say it would have been of little help, because students are too accustomed to taking the passive part. They would have been at a loss and probably not very serious about what we were doing. I had to begin, therefore, by giving students practice in question making and also with modeling what I had in mind. How I should do this was not entirely clear at first, but some ideas I picked up at a Junior Great Books workshop provided some help.

Q. Would you explain?

A. I now start with a simple story, or at least one we take to be simple. "Cinderella" works well. All the students know it, and nothing about it seems intimidating. Also, questions probably lurk in everyone's mind about familiar fairy tales. I tell the students that each of us should construct a question about this story and that discussion in class will be based on these questions. There are only two rules to observe. The first is that the question must *not* be one that can be answered only by looking up a fact from the story, such as, "What were Cinderella's jobs in her stepmother's house?"; and, second, each person must really care about his or her question — must, I mean, really be curious to have an answer.

Q. Do the students come up with questions immediately?

A. They do, but teacher modeling is very important in the beginning. I usually give the first example. My personal question about the story always has to do with why Cinderella's stepmother didn't want her to go to the ball. Maybe this has something to do with questions I have about my own mother. The important point, though, is that the students see immediately that this is a genuine question. It's not one for which I have an answer, and it is one that I am eager to hear people talk about. This is crucial, I think. I mean that students begin to see how questions help us search for things we do not yet know and are not just information checks.

Q. It's important then that the question be genuine in the sense that the answer is not known in advance and therefore must be sought through discussion. What kinds of questions do the students ask?

A. Yes, that's right; but it is also essential that students care about their questions and accept the responsibility for caring. The response to so much is, "Who cares?" But you asked about their questions. They raise matters such as, "Why didn't Cinderella run away when she was so badly treated?" or, "Why was there a midnight curfew?" or, "How did the prince know that he loved Cinderella, if this was

only their first date?" In discussion, they extend these questions further and ask questions such as, "Does anyone have the equivalent of a fairy godmother, someone who pulls them out of trouble?" This begins to pull away from the text a little, but it's fine because they are continuing in a questioning rhythm and exploring aspects of the story that have significance.

Q. What comes next?

A. Well, we apply this same question-making approach to all of the literary works that we read. For example, Orwell's *1984* or Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. I ask each student to construct three questions about the text we are reading. When you multiply this times 35 students in a class you can see the wondrous number of questions that we have to choose from.

Q. How do you decide which questions to discuss?

A. I choose them. This helps to insure that we don't become repetitious and also that we consider questions touching on a variety of different aspects of the text. Equity considerations are important, too. Research shows that much class discussion, if it takes place at all, actually happens between the teacher and a very small number of students in any class, usually the outstanding performers or the most outspoken. Teachers hate silence, and to avoid it they will turn again and again to those students who give quick responses. We have to do much, much better than this and begin to draw as many students as possible into discussion, into inquiry. So I make sure that I select questions from everyone in the class over a given period of time. I actually keep a record, and I'm not sure how fair I would be if I didn't. You should see how thrilled a student is when his or her question is chosen. Also, you might be surprised to see how courtesy and respect in discussion are promoted because the question chosen is one that a classmate cares about.

Q. So practice in speaking and listening comes into this, too. Can you tell me how the questions that your students ask differ from the prepared ones in the textbooks?

A. Let me give you a few examples. Instead of asking, "Who is Big Brother?" in Orwell's *1984*, a student might ask, "Was Big Brother ever really alive?" The first question, as I said earlier, is likely to get a dull, literal response, while the second invariably moves beyond factual considerations and provokes students to speculate about such things as the nature of symbolism, of propaganda, and the relationship of both to truth and deception. The second question, that is, asks something students want to know in order to feel comfortable with the book, but asking it almost immediately gets them into the uncomfortable matters that Orwell raises for us. The first question invites them to be bland.

Q. Can you mention a few others?

A. Sure. Every year students ask if Winston is alive or dead at the end of the book. Punishment and death are stark facts in Orwell's story. Students also have strong feelings about these things. So they want to know if Winston has survived and, if so, what kind of person he has become. This question, by the way, does not take students outside the book but rather directly into it. They try to figure out how much they can conclude based on what they know at the point where the story ends. Students also frequently ask questions that have to do with love or friendship. For example, "Did Winston and Julia really love each other, or were they only using one another?" or, "Did Winston regret betraying Julia?"

Q. It sounds as if your students ask questions about very fundamental things — as you say, about love and friendship, life and death.

A. Very much so — and things about which we all have strong emotions. In the beginning, they ask almost entirely about character and never about form. They care a great deal about the choices that characters make — why they do this instead of that — and also about what fate befalls them. This is the way they make literature their own — by asking if they would make the same choice as the character in a story or how they would be if they themselves lived in similar circumstances. Asking these kinds of questions leads them toward the way a book illuminates human action and expands understanding of human behavior.

Q. But does it miss other important questions? I mean questions about voice and style, the intended audience, and the purpose of the author? Questions about the literary nature of a text?

A. Yes, you are right. Also questions about setting and the historical context of a story. Student questions almost never raise these as important considerations. So I have to prompt and prod to have them included, especially in the beginning. But your question brings me to an essential point about this approach. Allowing students to frame questions doesn't mean that a teacher forfeits his or her right to introduce questions or considerations into the discussion. The teacher does back off a little, but he or she does not step out of the picture entirely.

Q. So you do bring in things that student questions may miss or not touch on?

A. Of course. But I hope that I am not jumping in all the time, out of fear that something is being missed. I try to work things in over the course of time. This relates to the recursive approach discussed in *Academic Preparation in English*. One returns to a question often days or weeks after it has been raised and points to a new aspect of it or a deeper level of complexity. In this way students begin to see the many implications of questions and how pursuing their investigation involves ever more complex responses.

Q. So a question is never really dropped once it has been raised?

A. I hope not. My responsibility is to help a question grow larger, to work different sides of it at different times. In this way students begin to see how complex a question can be, and this shows in the work they do. The responses they make in March or April are very different from those I get in September or October. They do rise to the challenge of their own questions.

Q. Given what you have said about recursiveness, perhaps you won't mind if I return to the beginning of this

conversation. The kind of classroom you have sketched seems so much richer, so much more lively, than the one in which a teacher clings to the workbook and lots of short-answer questions; and yet it is this second situation that research says prevails in many schools. Why is this so?

A. I think that Dennie Wolf touched on most of the reasons at the EQ Institute this summer. There is the old bugaboo of "coverage": we insist that we have to hurry on, leaving questions literally seconds after they have been asked, so as to get everything read.

Q. As if *everything* could be read!

A. Exactly. And then, of course, high school teachers do not live in a climate of inquiry themselves. The organization of schools often involves everyone in a lot of "box checking,"

... Some teachers may not trust the ability of students to ask pertinent questions.

making sure that we devote so many minutes to this and so many minutes to that. In many places we have a kind of "checklist" curriculum rather than the recursive strategy of ever-deepening questions and ongoing inquiry that I mentioned. Also, to be fair, it's a difficult thing to guide discussion among 35 students of varying abilities and interests.

But, even more unfortunately, some teachers may not trust the ability of students to ask pertinent questions. This is the case, even though massive research has shown the incredible intellectual achievements of all young children, as beginning from birth they effortlessly learn so extraordinarily much about their language, their culture, the world. This achievement results from their own native curiosity much more than from what anyone deliberately tries to teach them.

Q. It's this curiosity that you try to tap by letting questions flow a little more from students?

A. Yes, and also by letting the literature that we read speak to this curiosity. *Academic Preparation in English* says that "the voice of literature is almost always personal." I try to remember this: that literature speaks to the individual and that the transaction between text and reader always takes place first in some private, personal way. Allowing students to have their own questions permits this transaction to take place more fully and to reveal something of it in a public way. I'm always surprised by my own discoveries as I become part of such discussions. One time we were reading Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* and a student had asked, "Who was Stephen's best friend?" The talk that followed was phenomenal — touching on so much about Stephen's loneliness and its sources in country, family, and even in time. I came away from it understanding far more about the book than I had understood going in, and this was a question I would never have thought to ask. Certainly it's not one that you could find in any textbook.

Teachers pose questions to other teachers, as they relax during a break in sessions at the EQ Summer Institute in Santa Cruz, California.

A Reporter's Questions

Edna Buchanan

[The teachers who planned activities on questioning for the EQ Summer Institute thought it useful to consider how successful questioning takes place in professions other than teaching. With this in mind, they invited Edna Buchanan, crime reporter for the Miami Herald, *to speak to them about how she uses questions in the gathering of news stories. Below we include excerpts drawn from a transcription of Buchanan's talk, and her words remain, with very minor changes, as they were spoken. Shortly after delivering this talk, Edna Buchanan was awarded a Pulitzer Prize for "versatile and consistently excellent police reporting." Her experiences as a crime reporter will be the subject of a forthcoming book to be published by Random House.]*

My name is Edna Buchanan. I cover crime for the *Miami Herald*. Writing police stories is never dull. It is people stories: what makes them tick, become heroes or homicidal maniacs; what brings out the best in them or drives them berserk. And it is all there: greed, sex, violence, comedy, tragedy. You can't learn as much about people on any other newspaper beat.

I was the first woman journalist in South Florida to cover crime full-time. When I joined the *Herald* 16 years ago there were few women assigned to major crime stories. Now I am happy to say that I have a number of female competitors, and I think that editors may be realizing that women can cover crime in the street as well as, and maybe better than, men.

Nobody loves a police reporter. I have been threatened with arrest, threatened with physical harm, had rocks thrown at me, received subpoenas and obscene phone calls. I have often been treated as an unwelcome intruder. A lot of people blame you for the bad news. I guess it is human nature. Somebody gets himself in trouble and then when you report it, he turns on you as if it is your fault, not his, that he is in this mess. The truth can make you free, but it can also get you in a lot of trouble. The Greeks used to kill the messenger who brought the bad news. That attitude survives today.

But a big satisfaction I find is that police stories often produce results — they make a difference. Sometimes laws are even changed because of them. I discovered some years ago that a Miami Beach man had been convicted of two murders and sentenced to two life sentences, then was released on parole after five years. You don't have to be a genius in math to make out that this was two and a half years for each murder. As a result, I did some research into the meaning of life imprisonment and discovered that thousands of people in this county who have been sentenced to spend the rest of their natural lives in prison are now walking around free after a surprisingly short period of time, often committing new and terrible crimes. Partly because of this research and the public response to it, the Florida legislature passed a law that under certain circumstances persons sentenced to life for first degree murder must serve a minimum of 25 years before parole. The link here between justice and public enlightenment is very important.

But care must be taken. The *Herald* has half a million circulation, closer to 600,000 on Sundays; and literally millions of people worldwide may read a story if it goes out on the wires. We all know the importance of accuracy, but it is even more important professionally, ethically, and morally in crime reporting. A news story mentioning somebody's name can ruin his life or come back and haunt him 20 years later. It is there in black and white, on file like a police record. You never outlive it. Something on radio or TV is gone in a second, and if you sneezed, you missed it. But when it is in the newspaper, it is forever. We deal with people's lives, reputations, and careers. It's a very heavy responsibility.

Terrible damage has sometimes been done. I know of a case in Fort Lauderdale in which a reporter irresponsibly identified an elderly man as a suspect in a vicious murder of a young mother and her small children. He was sort of a recluse who lived in the same area. He didn't kill them, but he did kill himself. He committed suicide after the story was published. He could not live with the thought that he was being suspected of such a terrible thing. And in fact he wasn't. It was a mistake. The police had ruled him out as a suspect long before the story appeared. So a reporter has to go the distance, always look a little bit further, knock on one more door, make one more phone call, ask one more question, because it may be the one that counts.

So now about questions. I am not an educator; I am only a reporter. I can only tell you how I use questions to stimulate responses. I hope you will find something useful to apply to your own encounters.

Questions are a big part of what I do, and I think a reporter's greatest fear is not asking the right one.

Sometimes you get a chance to ask only one question, and if you are lucky it's the right one. A reporter can get drawn into a story personally — maybe teachers do, too. For me, it hasn't always been the pretty ones. I covered the case of a young girl on a bicycle who was killed by a hit-and-run driver. The driver had to back up to release the bicycle from under his car. Then he got out and threw both the bike and the girl into a ditch, where she died. She was 12 years old. The police worked the heck out of this case and solved it two days before the statute of limitations took effect, which was when the driver would have been free from prosecution forever. They brought him in in handcuffs. The TV cameras were outside, but I was waiting in the police station lobby. I jumped onto the elevator with him and the two detectives, who were not crazy about me joining them, but they were gentlemen. I had the chance to ask only this one question: "Do you remember the accident?" He said, "Yes, I dream about it every night." I put that in my story. He confessed to the detectives that day, but later got a sharp defense attorney, who had the confession ruled inadmissible by the

court. He then repudiated what he had said to the police and pleaded not guilty.

I got subpoenaed to the pre-trial hearing, and of course it is strict policy, thumbs down, against a reporter testifying. Otherwise, we would spend all our time in court. They're even tougher about it now, because of some of the adverse rulings in the last two years. But this time it was different. The guilty driver might actually go free, and of course I wouldn't be testifying to anything that was not in my story. All I would swear to was the accuracy of what I had written.

So I did testify: that I was wearing press identification, carrying a reporter's notebook, and had identified myself to him as a reporter. He did not think that I was a police officer. Even though his confession to the police was ruled out, what he said to me was not. Based on that the defendant and his lawyer decided to change his plea to guilty rather than have a jury hear my testimony. It saved the taxpayers the expense of a trial and from the possibility that he might have been let off.

Edna Buchanan. Drawing by Silverman: © 1986. The New Yorker Magazine, Inc.

Sometimes you forget to ask the most obvious question. We had a police radio in the office of the Miami Beach paper that I worked for before I joined the *Herald*, and one afternoon it said there was a robbery in progress at a South Beach liquor store. So I jumped into my car and rushed over there. When I got out of the car, the owner of the store, a tough old guy in his late 60s, who had been robbed about five or six times, came running out the front door. He ran past me down the street, toward the first approaching police car. I ran into the store to see what had happened. There was an entire rack of broken liquor bottles in the middle of the floor. In the far corner there was a man crouched, trembling and panicky. I rushed over, asked him if he was all right and what had happened. He was a terrible interview. He kept rolling his eyes and saying, "I don't know, man, I don't know nothing." The poor guy is in shock, I thought. But I kept asking him questions: "Did you see the robber? What did he look like? Which way did he go?" At this point, I looked up and saw the owner and three policemen, their noses pressed against the plate glass window, beckoning me to come out. I tried to ignore them, because the police have a habit of whisking away the witnesses before they can be interviewed, and I still hadn't gotten anything worth printing out of this guy.

I kept asking questions, but finally I looked again, and this time the police looked angry, waving their arms, demanding that I come out. I gave up and walked out onto the sidewalk. The police ran past, tackled the guy, and handcuffed him. He was the robber. I got subpoenaed to his trial by the defense; they wanted me to testify on his behalf, to say that he was a perfect gentleman while I was there in the store with him. I did testify that he was a perfect gentleman, though a lousy interview. The judge gave him 20 years. So sometimes not asking the obvious question will cause you to miss the proper perspective.

The wrong question at the wrong time can really gum up the works. Once I was going along on a narcotics raid with the police department. There was a poolroom, where they believed there was dealing in drugs. I called my editors and told them to monitor the police radio channel. This way they would know if something big happened and could hold space for my story. They gave the job to a young intern named Herb. I was there with the police, crouched in the bushes, watching the poolroom until all the people the police suspected had arrived. Meanwhile, back at the office Herb had his ear to the radio and heard nothing. This was his chance to make good, and he was worried that maybe, somehow, he had missed it. So he kept calling the local police asking if they had raided the poolroom yet. That is a no-no. The police get paranoid about this sort of thing. They didn't know who he was, of course, and wouldn't tell him a thing.

Meanwhile, we were still hiding in the bushes watching the place and swatting mosquitoes. Finally Herb got desperate. He was afraid that he had missed it. So he called the poolroom and asked if the police had arrived yet. We were still crouched out there, when all of a sudden people came barreling out of the poolroom, running in all different directions. They were coming out the doors and the windows. Inside you could hear the toilet flushing non-stop. The police moved in fast, when they saw what was happening. They found a lot of narcotics on the floor, where people had thrown them down. But they couldn't arrest anybody, because they couldn't prove who the drugs belonged to. The police never did find out how things went wrong. I had a suspicion and asked Herb. He confessed.

Questions are a big part of what I do, and I think a reporter's greatest fear is not asking the right one. People and police get annoyed and angry when you are terribly persistent and keep asking questions, but secretly I think a lot of them admire you for it over the long run. If they know

you never give up and never go away, they eventually start to tell you what you need to know. So many times I am at police headquarters taking notes on an absolutely marvelous story when another reporter on routine rounds calls and says, "Is anything happening?" The cop says no, and they hang up. Police are only human, and it is a lot easier to say no. If he had said yes, the reporter would start to ask questions; and he would have the hassle of looking up the answers and getting permission from the higher-ups to talk about it. So they take the easy way out. The best technique is to keep them talking. If they say nothing is happening, I ask, "No murders, no rapes, no floods, no fires?" Lots of times they will finally say, "Well, there was a little abduction last night." And I always ask about developments on last week's cases — any sign of the escaped fugitive, the health of some injured officer, that sort of thing. Small talk does pay off.

I never have qualms about talking to the relatives of victims, either. For everyone who refuses to talk, a dozen really want to get it off their chest. They want to discuss it. They are grateful for the chance. And actually, in many cases, it is only fair to the victims or their families. Sometimes it is the first and last time they ever get to tell their side of the story. So it really should be done right. If I call somebody who hangs up on me, I always give them 60 seconds to reconsider, then redial and say that we were cut off. Often they regret hanging up, and on the second call, maybe 50 percent of the time, they will begin to talk. Sometimes, of course, they just hang up again, but it is worth trying. I don't call a third time, because it would be harassment. But I always try to make that second call.

The most important question, of course, is the one that is left unasked.

A lot of people freeze if you start writing down what they are saying, or they start choosing their words very carefully. Sometimes you have to put the notebook away and just memorize. I excuse myself to go to the bathroom a lot, where I make some notes, then quickly write it all down when I get back to the car. Often that is why telephone interviews can be so successful. There is no distraction from the notebook, or the microphone, or how you look. Maybe there is something here for the classroom, too.

The most important question, of course, is the one that is left unasked. Once I forgot to ask some detectives what the victim in a street killing was wearing. The man was shot in the chest by someone in a pick-up truck, who threw his body into the street. Later, however, I learned that the victim at the time he was killed was wearing a black taffeta cocktail dress and red high heels. Not only a curious detail, but an obvious clue to the motive. When I confronted the detectives with, "Why didn't you tell me?," they said, "Well, you didn't ask."

Sometimes both the police and criminals alike laugh when I always ask at the end of an interview, "Is there anything else you want to tell me?" Some of them say I sound like their priest, but you would be surprised at some of their responses. In my case, off-the-wall confidences, off-the-record secrets, and wonderful leads on other stories. As I say, all this is very basic. But it works for me, and it is not out of some book. It's real life.

Recently I did a little investigative piece on why dry cleaners charge more — much more — to launder women's shirts than they do men's. It's rank discrimination. I went to my dry cleaner and interviewed the manager for this story. He had some lame explanations, the strongest being that this is the way it has always been. I kept at it and at one point in the interview, the manager rolled his eyes and said, "Why? Why? Why? You sound like my little granddaughter." This quote stayed in the story, which, by the way, did result in many local firms advertising that they are equal opportunity dry cleaners. I do find that this is one of the secrets — I mean, not to lose the basic simplicity of child-like questions. The simpler, more direct, shorter that questions are, the more likely they are to get a good honest answer.

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You must go after details. You can make a wonderful story of detail, detail, and detail. So you ask questions wanting to know what they wore, what was cooking on the stove when it all happened, what they were watching on TV when the bullet crashed through the window, or what was playing on the juke box when the shooting started. One woman beat her husband to death during "Family Feud." He was sitting there watching it on TV, when she just came up behind him and let him have it. To me, these details are important.

Details give a story depth. It's the lack of them I worry about in television news. I almost took a job with TV once. It was tempting. Every story on television is on the front page and so immediate. If it's a great story, you can break into a scheduled show and be on the air right away. It can be at noon, at six, at eleven — anytime they want, if it's a big enough story. That's very attractive. But it can also be very shallow. On television, unless it was World War III, they wouldn't give it more than three minutes. And they just like things that are visual. They like nothing better than a big fire with flames 50 feet high. They can shoot that and go away happy, just taking the press release handed out by the Fire Department or Police Department to read along with their footage. We can get the details and go into depth about things, really find out the story behind the story. Our job is harder and I think more satisfying.

I wish you guys had been around when I was a high-risk student. If there ever was a lackluster scholar, it was me. And yet some of the brightest moments of my life, and some of the major motivators in it, were teachers. Sometimes I think that people forget to tell you how important you are to them.

My mom was 17 when I was born, and my father left us

when I was 7. I didn't like school. I think I may have started too young. I was 4 in kindergarten, 5 in first grade. I didn't have much social interaction with other kids. I wasn't at all athletic, probably because I couldn't see beyond the end of my nose. And I couldn't spend much time with kids my own age, because, from age 7 on, I was caring for my sister, who was 3 years younger. I cooked, cleaned, and took care of the household chores while my mother worked. So I didn't get to mingle too much with kids my own age, and I was always the youngest in the class, and unfortunately always the tallest girl as well. In fact, I was taller than most of the boys. So add in self-conscious, gawky, and near-sighted, and you get, you know, a real mess. Also I wore hand-me-downs that people passed on to my mother. I felt like everybody laughed at me, and sometimes they did. I hated school. And I did have a few teachers who were unkind, which added to the burden.

An elementary school math teacher, for instance, told me once in front of the entire class that I would never be anything, not even a good housewife, because I would be unable to count my change in the supermarket or figure out the measurements for a recipe. Everybody laughed. I'm sure she quickly forgot it, but I never have, and that was more than 30 years ago. Some things burn themselves into the brain forever. So I was a student at risk early on. When I was in the seventh grade, I dreaded Sunday nights because I knew morning meant school; it was that bad. And not since then, while covering murder, mayhem, or riots, have I dreaded anything else so much.

... Once [a teacher] asked me a question that I'm sure changed my life.

One bright spot, though, was my English teacher, Edna Maye Tunis. She thought I could write. We are discussing questions here. Well, once she asked me a question that I'm sure changed my life. She asked it in front of the whole class — but also later in a little note. "Will you dedicate a book to me someday?" That just blew my 11-year-old mind and set up all sorts of fantasies. By the end of the term, I was trying to sell stories to the *Saturday Evening Post*. I showed Mrs. Tunis my first rejection slip. I didn't know what to make of it, but she explained that it would be the first of many such rejections, but I should never let them discourage me, or give up, because someday I would write and sell books. She was right. I haven't sold to the *Saturday Evening Post*, but I have written for a lot of other magazines. And I have written a book. Now I have a contract with Random House to do a second book, and Mrs. Tunis's name will be on the dedication page.

Encouragement can come in ways you may not suspect. Once in high school I labored over an epic poem, and, after finishing it, slipped it into the mailbox of my ninth-grade English teacher. I was shy and too embarrassed to sign my name, but I was eager to see if she would mention it in class. She did. She asked who had written it. Nobody answered. She pointedly asked an honor student if she had written it. The girl said no. So the teacher asked if the author would see her later after class. I didn't, and never told. What she said was encouragement enough. Her suspicion that the best student in the class might be the author meant that she thought the poem had some merit. So I did feel encouraged. But I didn't know how to get my poem back either. That's when I learned to make copies.

What these teachers did for me was so important. It's amazing how people like you can change somebody's life or cause them to do something later on. A few special teachers have had a lot to do with my sticking with the things I can do and think are important. Once when I was 21 or so, I took a creative writing course. A clothes-horse friend wanted to take a course in millinery design at a local high school, and she asked me to go with her, because she didn't want to drive there alone at night. I had no interest in hats, so I looked through the list of courses offered and creative writing sort of leaped out. The teacher was a young man, and his name was David Shaber.

The class was large, and I was very intimidated. I thought I was in over my head and almost dropped out. But I stayed long enough to write the first short story. David Shaber liked it. I was overwhelmed that he took my writing attempts seriously and wanted to help all he could. Those classes were so stimulating that I couldn't sleep at night after I got home. I had never been so motivated. David Shaber had made me think that I should not give up on the seed Mrs. Tunis had planted in me.

Many years later, I decided to get in touch with David Shaber and tell him how he had helped change my life. Now working at the *Herald*, I telephoned him at his home in Connecticut. It was Christmas Eve, more than 20 years after that fateful writing class. He was surprised at the call from a stranger. He remembered teaching the course. He even remembered one of the students, a guy who was a poet and drove a sports car. He did not remember me at all. I didn't expect him to. I wanted to share with him that because of things he had said to me in a classroom a long time ago, I was now sitting in Miami making a living at writing, had been doing it for years, had published one book, and was at work on a second. I lived in a house on the water, and had a career, not just a job, thanks to him. It made me feel good to share that with him. I hope he felt the same way.

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